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SUBJECT: PAKTIA PROVINCE: IMPROVING SECURITY SITUATION, MAJOR
DEVELOPMENT PROJECTS AND A POPULAR GOVERNOR

Security

1. (SBU) From January through the end of May 2008, the security situation in most of Paktia province has been relatively calm, with the possible exception of the Zadran Arc districts of Gerdai Serai, Shwak, and Wasi Zadran on the border with Khost province, and Zurmat district bordering Ghazni, Logar, and Paktika provinces. During the first three months of the year, Paktia experienced typically harsh winter weather, with several feet of snow and constant below-freezing temperatures in many districts. Predictably, the enemy abandoned most of the province during those months and reportedly waited out the winter on the Pakistani side of the border. There were very few IED, mortar, or indirect fire incidents against coalition forces or bases during those months.

2. (SBU) As in the previous year, there were rumors that the enemy would gear up again for a "spring offensive" once weather permitted. Thus far, no such offensive has occurred in Paktia. Although sporadic IED incidents, mortar, and indirect fire attacks continue to occur in the Zadran Arc and in Zormat, the security situation has improved noticeably as a result of several operations and on-going presence by coalition forces in conjunction with the Afghan National Security Forces and civilian authorities. Though bringing security and governance to Zormat is a long-term project, combined efforts since late last year by the maneuver battalion, Afghan army, Afghan police, PRT civil affairs, and Governor Hamdard's administration have brought some level of peace to that district. The remaining nine districts in Paktia enjoy relative peace, including districts like Jaji, Chamkani and Patan bordering Pakistan. This stable environment is due in large part to the effectiveness of the tribes in providing governance and rule of law to their constituents.

Development

3. (SBU) Paktia is an agricultural economy based on small family plots and small-animal herding, but it is incapable of producing enough foodstuffs to feed its own population. During most of the year, it must import significant amounts of wheat, rice and vegetables from Pakistan. During the harsh winter, the economy is virtually paralyzed, with farmers waiting for the snow melt to begin their farming cycle. This winter experienced a smaller than normal snowfall, causing agricultural officials to predict lower yields of traditional wheat, potato, garden vegetable and fruit crops. The expected reduced agricultural yields combined with the continuing high prices of staple food items from Pakistan is likely to cause real hardship for the population, especially those in remote districts, in the second half of the year.

¶4. (SBU) Two major projects on the horizon should significantly improve the living conditions of many Paktia residents in the next two years. Work on the USAID-funded road from Khost to Gardez through the Khost-Gardez pass will begin soon, with an anticipated completion date of late 2009. The road will make the city of Gardez a major commercial hub for the Loya Paktia region and should improve the agricultural economy of the Zadran Arc districts. The seven-million dollar, USAID-funded Paktia provincial hospital, to be completed by 2009, will provide the province with a high level of medical care and should reduce mortality rates among newborns and children and improve women's health care.

Governance

¶5. (SBU) Tribal elders, local political leaders and provincial residents welcomed the removal in January 2008 of highly unpopular Paktia Governor Rahmat and his replacement by respected Governor Hamdard in March. The contrast in styles between Rahmat and Hamdard could not have been greater. Rahmat, a former communist apparatchik, often berated and threatened tribal elders at shuras. Hamdard, a Pashtun and former mujahedin commander, treats elders and religious leaders with respect, is accessible to them, and is reportedly very generous with his own money in helping people in need. Hamdard is relentlessly lobbying the central government and NGOs to bring funding for infrastructure and social projects to Paktia.

¶6. (SBU) Hamdard has excellent relations with the provincial council (PC) and is supportive of efforts to strengthen the role of the PC. The Paktia PC continues to drive the provincial development plan

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(PDP), performing most of the PDP groundwork. Paktia's chief prosecutor and chief justice, both good PRT contacts, are now working with Governor Hamdard in extending rule of law to the districts. The one negative note continues to be the majority of ministry line officers, most of whom are ill-educated, and, in some cases appear disinterested in performing their jobs. The PRT is working with key line directors to try to upgrade their skills and motivational level.

WOOD